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ABSTRACT

Both the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and Open College Networks or Federations (OCNs) have the objective of creating nationally coherent frameworks of qualification and training in Britain. However, they are very different organizations and have distinct, though potentially complementary, roles. Issues where the two organizations share similar aims and practices are clarifying learning outcomes, assessment, criteria for assessment, accreditation of prior learning, modularization, and credit accumulation and transfer. Several important areas of difference remain between them: accreditation, definitions of outcomes, accreditation of prior learning, and processes and outcomes. Both OCNs and NVQs provide frameworks that facilitate credit accumulation and transfer, but there are considerable differences between the two systems. The principal differences relate to notions of value (measured in "credits" or "units") and level. Potentially, OCNs offer access routes into NVQs for groups of learners for whom traditional programs delivering NVQs may not be appropriate as a first step; they offer a mechanism for NVQ units of competence to be combined flexibly with other learning to meet local and individual needs, whether of employers or of local groups and communities. Learners would be able to obtain NVQs in their local environment, with additional skills appropriate to their particular needs. (YLB)

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Open College Networks and National Vocational Qualifications

A Development Paper

**Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education
in consultation with the
National Council for Vocational Qualifications**



UDACE

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1 Introduction

This paper has been produced by the Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education in consultation with the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). It attempts to clarify the similarities and differences between the aims and processes of the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Framework and Open College Networks or Federations (OCNs), and to identify the potential for developing the relationship between them, in order to improve access to qualification and progression in education and training for adults. The paper was prepared in the course of a development project funded by the Department of Education and Science to promote the development of Open College Networks in England and Wales.

The paper is intended for all those involved in the implementation of the National Vocational Qualification framework or the development of Open College Networks, and aims to increase understanding and to stimulate further development.

2 Two Structures

Although both NCVQ and OCNs are concerned to help create nationally coherent frameworks of qualification and Credit Transfer in education and training, they are very different organisations and have distinct, though potentially complementary, roles. OCNs are local and regional agencies established to provide accreditation and credit transfer for adult learning of all kinds. NCVQ, on the other hand, has been established by the government to develop a single, unified and coherent framework for all National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Any comparison of the two systems has therefore to take account of these fundamental differences between the two organisations.

The NCVQ was established as a result of a review of vocational qualifications undertaken by the government, and is responsible to ministers for the establishment of a framework of NVQs covering all occupational areas by 1992. The Council's remit covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland and is concerned to establish National standards to enhance flexibility and transferability within occupational groups. NCVQ is only concerned with the accreditation of vocational qualifications designed by awarding bodies, and built upon standards of occupational competence established by Lead Industry Bodies. An NVQ is therefore directly linked to an occupational role.

OCNs are locally based and controlled organisations arising from and sustained by local interest and support, especially in educational institutions and Local Authorities. Whereas NCVQ has no provision for local or regional structures, OCNs exist essentially at those levels, coming together nationally through the National Open College Network (NOCN) which supports local networks and is the body through which the national Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) Agreement was developed and is sustained. The learning outcomes accredited by OCNs may include work related outcomes, but also include many which are not exclusively related to employment.

There are several reasons for wanting to develop the relationships between the two systems. They include the opportunity to:

- use OCN routes to open access to national vocational qualifications (or parts of qualifications) to wider groups of people;
- enable learners to move more freely between vocational and non-vocational areas of study;
- create stronger bridges between general and vocational education and training provision;
- enable courses to be designed whose outcomes include credit towards NVQ Units as well as other skills to meet specific local needs.

The next sections of this paper explore the differences and similarities of the two systems.

3 Similarities

Whilst there are important differences between OCNs and NCVQ which have already been referred to, there are a number of issues where the two organisations share similar aims and practices.

Clarifying Learning Outcomes

For both systems the first concern is what individuals are able to do, know or understand. It is these outcomes, rather than course attendance, which are assessed and recognised by the award of credits in OCNs and Units in NVQs. Both systems require education and training providers to make the outcomes of learning explicit and public.

Assessment

Both NCVQ and OCNs recognise the importance of developing consistency between what is being assessed and how it is being assessed. For NCVQ, assessment is primarily about collecting evidence of occupational competence and it therefore seeks to ensure that assessment should, wherever possible, be carried out in the workplace. OCN accreditation requires that assessment is appropriate to the target group, consistent with the aims of a programme of learning and appropriate to measure and authenticate its intended learning outcomes. Both approaches call for significant changes in traditional assessment practices.

Criteria for Assessment

NVQs, built up from units and elements of competence, with specific performance criteria related to occupational competence, are criterion-referenced (based on defined standards) rather than norm-referenced (based on comparisons with other candidates). Similarly, OCNs establish criteria for assessment to determine the level at which credits are offered. Such approaches demystify concepts of success and failure in educational achievement and consequently are of real benefit to adult learners.

Accreditation of Prior Learning

NCVQ has brought the issue of accrediting prior learning (APL) into the mainstream of education and training. OCNs have developed practices within their own systems to facilitate APL and extend the opportunities available.

Modularisation

The unit structure of NVQs is stimulating the modularisation of learning programmes, making them more flexible and accessible. OCNs, through their credit structures, also encourage modularisation and require that, on long programmes, learners can get credit for part completion. NCVQ's detachment of qualifications from modes of delivery will also stimulate more flexible modes of course delivery.

Credit Accumulation and Transfer

Both NVQs and OCNs are credit accumulation and transfer systems which enable learners to gain certification for small pieces of learning which can then be accumulated to form a full qualification. This is recognised in the form of credits or units by a large number of awarding bodies.

4 Differences

Alongside the common approaches in those areas mentioned above, there remain important areas of difference between the two systems.

Accreditation

Both organisations use the term "accreditation", but they use it in rather different ways. OCNs "accredit" learning programmes and the learners who achieve the specified learning outcomes. Thus, in an OCN, "accreditation" is applied both to a programme and the learners. NCVQ, on the other hand, "accredits" qualifications developed by awarding bodies as satisfying the occupational requirements agreed by the appropriate Lead Body. NCVQ does not accredit the individuals, nor does it consider the learning programmes, which prepare learners for qualifications.

Definitions of Outcomes

In OCNs, learning outcomes are defined by tutors/trainers or tutors/trainers and learners together. The requirements of NVQs, on the other hand, are based upon the standards of occupational competence agreed by Industry Lead Bodies (whose members are drawn from appropriate employment interests).

NVQs are awarded for agreed sets of units of competence. These units of competence encompass the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out a particular occupational role, and are endorsed by Lead Bodies. The outcomes accredited by OCNs are determined by tutors and trainers in the light of, or in discussion with, the target group for whom the learning programme is designed. These outcomes may include skills, knowledge and understanding related to work and study, or to responsibilities within the local community, within the home or the family. Alternatively, they may be related to the particular interests or passions of an individual or group, be it tap dancing, fishing or royal cake icing.

In this regard the two frameworks are working from quite different perspectives. NCVQ offers a "top-down" model defining, from a national perspective, the competences necessary for particular work roles; OCNs are based on a "bottom-up" model which starts from learning needs identified by tutors in consultation with learners.

However, these perspectives are not contradictory and can complement each other. There is no reason why OCN accredited learning should not include that which is needed in preparation for assessment for an NVQ. Under certain circumstances it may even be possible for the OCNs to provide the assessment for units of NVQs.

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)

The same applies in relation to APL. NCVQ will encourage the use of APL to give recognition to achievement related to specific work roles. OCNs will, in addition to this, be concerned to recognise achievements not

directly related to a specified work role, recognising the artificiality of vocational/non-vocational distinctions for most adult learners.

Processes and Outcomes

Both OCNs and NCVQ are concerned with outcomes, standards and assessment, but only OCNs are concerned with the delivery of learning programmes.

NVQs are awarded for outcomes defined as units of competence, NCVQ is not responsible for the learning process leading to the successful demonstration of competence. That responsibility rests with the education and training providers and the awarding bodies. NCVQ does however establish both the standards against which outcomes must be assessed (through performance criteria), and the range of contexts in which they should be applied (through range statements).

OCNs, in common with other awarding bodies, are concerned with the processes as well as the outcomes of learning. They recognise learning programmes and activities through a process which examines the intended outcomes of learning, the means of achieving and assessing those outcomes, and of their authentication.

5 A Framework for Credit Accumulation and Transfer

Both OCNs and NVQs provide frameworks which facilitate credit accumulation and transfer. However there are considerable differences between the two systems. The principal ones relate to notions of value (measured in "credits" or "units") and level.

Credits and Units

Any Credit Accumulation and Transfer system requires a "currency" to compare one piece of learning with another. For OCNs this currency is based on credits, calculated in terms of "notional time". For NVQs the currency is the Unit of Competence, identified as a self standing group of elements of competence which would be recognised and have value in employment. This means that OCN credits are broadly equivalent in "size", while NVQ Units can be very different, according to the occupation considered. Although this makes transfer between the two systems more complex for individuals it is possible both to ascribe OCN credit values to NVQ Units or parts of Units and to design OCN accredited courses to deliver NVQ units. It is therefore worth briefly exploring the two processes.

In OCNs tutors and trainers review the design of a learning programme and satisfy themselves that the way it is organised is consistent with intended learning outcomes. They agree what is to be assessed and how; and ensure that criteria for assessment at each level are clear. They then consider what would be reasonable tutor contact and private study time (in a variety of forms) for an average learner to achieve those learning outcomes. This total notional time is converted to credits by dividing the resulting figure by 30.

It should be stressed that the credit, not the time taken, is the measure of the size of the achievement. The concept of "notional time" is only relevant to the process of agreeing the credit value of particular outcomes. Once these are agreed, the credit is awarded to every individual who achieves the outcomes, regardless of the length of time s/he may take to do so.

NCVQ, on the other hand, does not operate with any definition of credit as such but uses Units as the smallest component which can be separately achieved. The Council provides a national system for recognising individuals' achievements in unit form, and enabling them to be accumulated towards the award of an NVQ.

A unit of competence is a self-standing group of elements of competence which would be recognised and have value in employment. Units of competence are derived by breaking down an occupational role into a number of key tasks, and are made up of elements of competence accompanied by performance criteria which indicate the standard to which they are to be assessed. There are broad guidelines as regards the number of elements in a unit and the number of units in an NVQ, but these are variable. Units do not therefore have equal value to one another, and different qualifications are not necessarily made up of equal numbers of units.

Levels

Both systems recognise the notion of progressive levels of achievement but use different bases for defining those levels. OCNs base their levels on stages of learning, from basic education at Level 1 to preparation for Higher Education at Level 4. NVQ levels, on the other hand, are based on performance in employment, defined in terms of the degree of supervision required, from Level I, where constant supervision is required, to Level V, which represents independent professional practice. There is clearly no simple equivalence of level between the two systems, although it is possible to "translate" one into the other in specific situations.

OCN levels operate across all areas of learning, and require careful analysis of the learning undertaken. They consequently form a powerful tool in the staff and curriculum development functions of OCNs, for which NCVQ has no direct parallel. For OCNs conceptual skills, critical analysis and creativity and their consistent application are essential factors in determining at which level a programme of learning is being offered.

NCVQ and OCNs differ in their treatment of generic skills. For NCVQ they are currently assumed to be subsumed within the notion of occupational competence. Literacy, numeracy and personal effectiveness for example are seen as core skills underpinning all occupational competence. OCNs on the other hand can either recognise these as discrete areas and accredit them separately or subsume them within another area of study. Personal effectiveness, literacy or numeracy are recognised at different levels within the OCN accreditation framework reflecting their stage of development.

Credit Accumulation and Transfer

NVQs form a credit accumulation and transfer system which encourages individuals to accumulate units of competence separately to obtain a particular NVQ, (usually within a single occupational area) although NCVQ does not operate with a notion of "credit" as such. Some qualifications will be offered by more than one Awarding Body, while some Units will be common to several qualifications. In either situation Awarding Bodies are required to recognise each others awards.

OCNs enable learners to accumulate credits and to transfer them between OCNs and subject areas to suit their particular needs, which may or may not be related to national qualifications

OCN credits are accumulated by learners to achieve access to, or advanced standing on, another programme; for application for employment; or for personal satisfaction. Credits are accumulated flexibly in varieties of combinations in a Credit Record. The range of credits accumulated by a learner reflects their skills and interests and the purpose for which they are accumulating the credits, and may or may not be related to national qualifications.

OCN credits are transferred locally and regionally between members of a particular Network who recognise all credits issued by their own OCN. Nationally, a Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) Agreement has

been developed through the National Open College Network (NOCN) which enables credits issued by one OCN to be transferred to and recognised by another.

Core Skills and Generic Units

There has been considerable debate about the nature and place of "core" or "generic" skills and competences in national qualifications. This is a complex and critical area of development and work has been commissioned by NCVQ and the Secondary Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC), following recommendations made to Ministers in the Summer of 1990.

The particular experience of OCNs in assessing and accrediting such skills may have an important contribution to make to future work in this field..

6 Development Opportunities

An important starting point for OCNs is that they offer accreditation for learning where none has been available in the past. The learning programmes accredited by OCNs are therefore predominantly those which have not attracted accreditation by national awarding bodies.

Many of the programmes are short, and college or community based, run by community or voluntary organisations, or they are programmes customised to meet the specific needs of particular target groups, communities or employers. They can be accredited through OCNs principally because of the flexibility of the accreditation framework.

Examples of community-based programmes run by community or voluntary organisations include the following:

Machine-knitting or cake decorating programmes run as adult education classes in local community settings;

- Horticultural training run by city farm organisations;
- First aid and simple health care for Under-5s programmes run for parent and toddler groups or the PPA;
- Office Skills and Information Technology run by a community training centre.
- Programmes designed for specific target groups include:
- Specialist typing courses for second language speakers;
- Radio skills for black community groups;
- Car maintenance for women;
- Women into building trades;
- Programmes for learners with Special Educational Needs;
- Money management for community groups.

All of these programmes integrate subject and vocational elements with elements specifically related to the target group for whom the programme is designed. These often include confidence building, assertiveness training, particular cultural and language requirements.

Programmes designed to meet particular local employment needs include the following:

- ESL and Secretarial skills;
- Bilingual health tutors programmes run by a Local Authority training department where there is a demand for bilingual staff;
- Monitor Technology training for a computing firm;

- A programme for College administrative staff looking at the changes necessary to respond to NCVQ;
- Language training programmes for people in business where the businesses have very different language needs;
- Basic skills programmes for an Area Health Authority.

These programmes, while clearly "vocational", incorporate additional elements or modified elements of standard vocational programmes, which make them appropriate to local need.

Although the programmes identified above are in the main short and locally based, they all provide skills relevant to work, whether in paid employment, voluntary or domestic roles. OCN accreditation gives learners recognition for the learning outcomes achieved on such programmes and enables them to use it as evidence when seeking employment or access to further learning opportunities.

As more NVQs are developed, opportunities are being identified for OCN-accredited programmes, like those illustrated above, to have NVQ units incorporated into their design. Many tutors are keen to offer learners this opportunity. This requires that programme design and documentation should specify how the performance criteria for each element of a unit of competence are operated and recorded within the assessment procedures, which will also have to meet the requirements of the relevant awarding body/ies.

In some cases there may already be very close similarities between the existing programme and NVQ units of competence - for example "Radio skills for black community groups" is a programme adapted from a City and Guilds qualification to match more closely the needs of its particular target group. In other cases a greater adaptation may be necessary in order to incorporate all elements of one or more units of competence. While this will not be desirable in all cases, it is an option which should be available to tutors and trainers when designing learning programmes.

Enabling NVQ units to be incorporated in this way, can provide a stepping stone into the national vocational framework for learners for whom access directly on to a traditional vocational programme may be difficult. To understand how this could be achieved it is necessary to understand NCVQ's arrangements for unit accreditation.

Credits for Units

NCVQ "enables the units of competence on which qualifications are based to be certified separately and accumulated at a pace which suits individuals and employers alike." For this purpose "awarding body partners have agreed to recognise units certified by any of them as credits towards their own vocational qualifications". In other words, NCVQ does not accredit individual units of competence directly, and it leaves the credit accumulation function in the hands of national awarding bodies.

OCNs would not themselves wish to be hallmarked by NCVQ for the purpose of delivering NVQs, and NCVQ itself does not wish to encourage the proliferation of awarding bodies. Therefore, in order for it to be possible for units acquired within an OCN accredited programme to be accumulated towards an NVQ, relationships need to be established between OCNs and awarding bodies.

The rigour of OCN quality assurance processes, which operate in relation to both the process and the outcomes of learning, needs to be recognised by awarding bodies in order that units of competence achieved through OCN-accredited programmes can be recognised by the appropriate awarding bodies for the purpose of awarding NVQs. This would parallel similar developments between OCNs and the CNAA/CVCP Access Course Recognition Group. Local awarding body centres, where they have experience of OCN activity, have developed a high degree of confidence in their procedures. This is because there is often a measure of coincidence between moderators for OCNs and for other awarding bodies. Experience of accepting learners with OCN credits for entry to vocational programmes has demonstrated the value of OCN quality assurance procedures.

Staff and Curriculum Development

Tutors also choose OCN accreditation because they wish to have access to the curriculum and staff development opportunities available through participation in the OCN accreditation processes. This is particularly helpful for tutors not attached to educational institutions, such as those working with community, voluntary and training organisations, who lack any other access to staff development opportunities with their peers.

7 Proposals for Development

Any mechanism which is established to enable OCN-accredited learning to be recognised towards an NVQ, must be as accessible as possible for learners whilst ensuring that national standards are observed. For widespread and easy acceptance of unit accreditation through OCNs, relationships need to be forged directly with awarding bodies. NCVQ and UDACE would wish to encourage these developments:

There are a number of areas where this could be progressed jointly with awarding bodies at a local level and the following are suggested for further discussion with interested parties:

1. Pilot or exemplar projects looking at how NVQ units accredited through OCNs can be recognised by awarding bodies towards an NVQ. These could take particular areas of work such as community-based machine knitting programmes or cake decorating and explore how NVQ units might be incorporated.
2. Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). Awarding bodies are expected to offer APL in relation to NVQ units. Learners with OCN credits should be able to use this facility to have their achievement accepted as an NVQ unit. OCNs can facilitate this process by ensuring that evidence of achievement is in an appropriate form. They may also make formal arrangements with awarding bodies or recognised awarding body centres in relation to advanced standing or recognition of particular units or programmes, to avoid the need for learners to make individual arrangements. Care would need to be taken to avoid this process being costly or cumbersome to learners.
3. Collaborative projects with FE Colleges, OCNs and awarding bodies to look at embedding NVQ units in short course provision and customised programmes provided for local employers or for particular target groups.
4. Joint recognition of moderators/assessors between awarding bodies and joint staff development activities in relation to flexible quality assurance procedures.
5. Joint activity between OCNs, awarding bodies and TECs to offer unit accreditation for YT and ET programmes this is a field where a number of OCNs are already very active.

8 Conclusion

Although NCVQ operates on a national "top-down", basis while OCNs are local, "bottom-up" initiatives the differences need not create impossible barriers to collaboration. Rather they present opportunities for complementary development which could improve access to education and training for adults and contribute to the raising the skills base of the economy.

Potentially OCNs offer access routes into NVQ for groups of learners for whom traditional programmes delivering NVQs may not be appropriate as a first step; they offer a mechanism for NVQ units of competence to be combined flexibly with other learning to meet local and individual needs, whether of employers, or of local groups or communities. Learners would be able to obtain NVQ units in their local environment, with additional skills appropriate to their particular needs.

By creating pathways between the NCVQ and OCN systems advantages could be achieved immediately for learners wishing to move between them, making both systems more responsive and more comprehensive.

Acknowledgment

The text of this paper was drafted by the UDACE Project Officer, Caroline Mager, in consultation with colleagues in NCVQ, in a number of Open College Networks and within UDACE. The Unit is most grateful to all concerned for their time and attention.



Open College Networks and National Vocational Qualifications

What is UDACE?

The Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education in England and Wales was created by the Secretary of State for Education and Science within the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

The Unit examines areas of possible development in the education of adults, recommends strategies for development and sponsors projects to encourage development.

The overall pattern of the Unit's activity is decided by a Steering Committee which usually works through small development groups of experienced practitioners to examine particular topics.

The Steering Committee gives priority in its work to topics where development

- will improve access to learning opportunities for adults
- will contribute to the creation of a more coherent service of education for adults
- is likely to improve the quality of learning opportunities available to adults

and, where initiatives by the Unit, including the publication of recommendations, guidelines or reports, or the sponsoring of investigations or projects are likely to lead to major improvements in the service.

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